

Call to Worship

As we begin our worship these words are for thinking today: 'Give thanks to God, for God is good; God's love endures forever. Let all who know God tell of their story from east and west, from north and south, we will tell our story. When we cried to God in our trouble, God saved us from our distress; God sent out the Word and healed us. Let us give thanks for God's unfailing love and tell of God's works with songs of joy in worship.'

Hymn – Come down, O Love Divine

Prayer of Adoration & Praise

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray.

Creator God, we come together as witnesses to your glory, as bearers of your good news, as hopeful children, as loving friends, as a community seeking your wisdom.

In a world of frustration and pain we look to your guiding hand for support and strength, for succour and healing. Direct us and lead us as we walk through this life attempting to live in the way to which you have called us.

Forgiving God, redeemer and companion, we come before you, hopefully and sorrowfully, comfortable and uncomfortable, carefree and troubled, to confess our love, to confess our adoration, to confess our failings, to confess that we try, to confess that we are greedy to confess that we are generous, to confess that we are selfish, and to confess that we are caring.

Through we live in a world where anger and hurt are commonplace, where neighbour is set against neighbour and the future is uncertain, we look to your guiding hand, for reassurance and understanding, for hope and for joy, as we walk through this life, attempting to live in the way to which you have called us.

For all this we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others that sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

Readings: Numbers 21: 4 – 9

The Snake Made of Bronze

⁴The Israelites left Mount Hor by the road that leads to the Gulf of Aqaba, in order to go around the territory of Edom. But on the way the people lost their patience ⁵and spoke against God and Moses. They complained, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to die in this desert, where there is no food or water? We can't stand any more of this miserable food!” ⁶Then the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people, and many Israelites were bitten and died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Now pray to the Lord to take these snakes away.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸Then the Lord told Moses to make a metal snake and put it on a pole, so that anyone who was bitten could look at it and be healed. ⁹So Moses made a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Anyone who had been bitten would look at the bronze snake and be healed.

John 3: 14 – 21

¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its saviour.

¹⁸ Those who believe in the Son are not judged; but those who do not believe have already been judged, because they have not believed in God's only Son. ¹⁹This is how the judgment works: the light has come into the world, but people love the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds are evil. ²⁰Those who do evil things hate the light and will not come to the light, because they do not want their evil deeds to be shown up. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light in order that the light may show that what they did was in obedience to God.

Hymn – In Christ Alone,

Sermon – ‘The God who believes in us!’

When I began training for the ministry at Jordanhill Parish Church, in the north of the city, during 2005, I had never preached a sermon and, to be honest, the thought of preaching terrified me. ‘Where do I begin,’ I wondered. How do you start a sermon? How do you keep your listeners listening? Maybe, you are sat here this morning, thinking the start of this sermon is awful – so you have switched off already! Please bear with me.

So, when, my Supervisor, asked me what my biggest ‘fears’ were, I said sermons and funerals. We got talking about sermons and he suggested that when I lack inspiration, I should look at a book called, ‘The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations’ as I may find a quote that would ‘spark’ my imagination.

Fast forward to this past week and I found myself, after the chat on Wednesday night, wondering where I should start today – so I dug out the ‘aforementioned’ book. It is full of quotations from the works of authors and poets, such as Mary Shelly, William Shakespeare, Lord Tennyson, Kenneth Grahame, and song writers such as John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

By Thursday afternoon, I must have read over one hundred quotes when it struck me that the quote I was looking for, as a starting point, was in today’s Gospel reading: *‘For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life.’*

For it is in these words that we see the essence of the whole Gospel story. We see the affirmation that God believes in us! Through the gift of His Son Jesus, God is firmly and resoundingly declaring: ‘I believe in humankind!’

However, to understand the wonder behind this statement, we maybe need to remind ourselves what, in the Biblical sense, it means to say: ‘I believe’. It does not mean accepting the existence of something, in the sense that we might believe in ghosts or flying saucers. It means belief in the sense of trust, putting our faith in something, and being read, if necessary, to stake our name and reputation on the object of our belief.

Seen in that light, how many people do we ‘truly’ believe in? Yet, that is the belief that God has in us. He does not see us through rose-tinted spectacles. He is not blind, for a moment, to our unreliability and sinfulness. On Mother’s Day, does this description not sound like a Mother?

For many of us, there will have been times when we have turned to our Mums for help and guidance. The more I think about it, the more I am convinced that a mother’s love can also be reminiscent of God’s love. That despite all our failings, God sees something so precious in us, so special and worth saving. What God sees within us, is worth enough for Him to send His only Son to die, a painful, excruciating death on a Cross.

Therefore, if the depth of love is measured by the value of its gift, then God's love must be a top of any measurement scale. Never more apt have been the following words, of the theologian, John Calvin: 'The true looking of faith is placing Christ before one's eyes and beholding in Him the heart of God poured out in love.'

However, the Gospel writer is not stating that God's love is only for Israel. For, God's love, is an indiscriminate love. A love that is embracing all of humankind, no matter what any individual has done. In the Bethlehem stable, the child in the manger, and the life, death and resurrection which followed, we see God's emphatic, personal affirmation of our worth!

Therefore, having established that God does indeed love us, John then removes that warm, cosy feeling of love and replaces it, with what you could describe as cold, hard judgement. Have we not just read that it was because God so loved the world, that He sent His only Son into the world? Later, John will go on to show us Jesus saying: '*I came into this world for judgement.*' (9:39) Which makes me ask, how can both things be true?

It is quite possible to offer someone an experience in nothing but love and for that love to result in a judgement. Have you ever offered someone an experience, that you really enjoy, only for that experience to become a judgement? Maybe, you love music and feel nearest to God when immersed in the power and thunder of a great symphony than anywhere else. You have a friend, who does not know anything about such music, and you wish to introduce them to this great experience. To share with them the invisible beauty that you enjoy. Your only aim to give your friend the happiness of a fantastic, new experience.

So, once the pandemic is over, you book tickets for the Royal Concert Hall and on the day meet you friend at the front door. After a few minutes, your friend is fidgeting and gazing around the hall, a look of extreme boredom on their face. Your friend has passed a judgement on themselves, that they have no music in their soul. The experience designed to bring them new happiness has become only a judgement.

We may take our friends to see a great masterpiece of art. We may take them to listen to an eloquent preacher. We may give them a book to read that we thoroughly enjoyed. Yet, their reactions are a judgement. Especially, when they find no beauty or thrill in what we place before them.

A visitor was being shown around an art gallery by one of its attendants. In the gallery, were certain priceless masterpieces, possessions of eternal beauty and unquestioned genius. At the end of the tour, the visitor said, 'Well, I don't think much of your old pictures.' The attendant answered quietly, 'Sir, I would remind you that these pictures are no longer on trial, but those who look at them are.' All the visitor's reaction had done was to show his own blindness.

All these thoughts leave me wondering, how should you and I react to Jesus? John argues that if we are open to Jesus and view Him as a new experience, then we are on our way to salvation. However, if we look at Jesus and see nothing lovely, then our reaction condemns us. For God sent Jesus in love.

Those who react in hostility to Jesus have loved the darkness rather than the light. Yet, we cannot claim to be superior, as there is always a level of condemnation within each one of us. For, it is when we compare ourselves with those that do not believe that we see ourselves for what we are.

Alcibiades, the spoilt Athenian man of genius, was a companion of Socrates, and every now and then, he would shout out: 'Socrates, I hate you, for every time I meet you, you let me see what I am.' If we are not afraid of the light, then we have nothing to fear. It is only the 'evil-doers' who do not wish to see themselves and who do not wish anyone else to see them, who should be frightened.

There is a story which is told of a young man who entered an extremely strict monastic order. It was so strict that members were permitted to speak only two words per year to the abbot. At the end of the first year, the young man appeared before the abbot and spoke his two words, 'bad food'. At the end of the second year, the young man appeared before the abbot and spoke two more words. He said, 'hard bed'. At the end of the third year, the young man came to the abbot and spoke his last two words. He said, 'I quit!' The abbot responded, 'Well, it's about time. Complain, complain, complain – that's all you've done since you got here!'

Even now, on the 14th of March 2021, we humans are still a people of darkness. We are people who often complain, rebel, and work against the Kingdom of God. Death is all we know, and our lives are filled with the patterns of sin.

However, God does an astonishing thing. He brings light. He erects a cross of death, so that we might look up and live. Even Nicodemus, when he looked up at the cross

could see the light in the darkest of days. Jesus loves the world and does not condemn it. He does not condemn you, if you will believe.

For, you see, it is by our reaction, our response to Jesus, that we stand revealed, and our souls are laid bare. If we regard Jesus with love, even with yearning, there is hope for us. However, if in Jesus we see nothing beautiful, nothing attractive, then, we have condemned ourselves. The One Who was sent in love, has become our judge. So, as we continue our journey through this Season of Lent, are we prepared to return God's love? Are we prepared to pick up our own cross? Are we prepared to follow Jesus all the way to Calvary and beyond? Are we prepared to risk our names and our reputations by proclaiming; 'God you believe in us and in return we believe in you!'

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Hymn – He will hold me fast

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray.

Loving God, just as Moses prayed for your people, we come together in prayer; look upon us with care and compassion, shine your light on us that we might live.

Out of the darkness of fear your people seek support and reassurance, as the world continues to struggle with war, poverty, disease, and hate, we pray for all those who are fearful; for all those wondering what tomorrow may bring. Help them to have hope, embolden them and guide them, and grant us the strength to be constant companions to all those in need of your love.

In a time of confusion and strife, when our communities and society are struggling to find a new purpose, a new way of caring for and loving one another, we pray for all those who are frustrated, those who desire a different, more peaceful world, more compassionate communities, and a more equal society.

We pray for all those who are angry, for those who see and know injustice, but have little power to create change.

We pray for all those who have been left behind in communities and a society of great wealth and education for some and poverty and exclusion for others.

Help them to have satisfaction and justice in your eternal love and understanding and grant us the strength to be constant companions to all those in need of your love.

As our world changes, and your church continues to search for its place at the heart of our communities, we pray for those seeking wisdom, seeking a way forward, to carry out your mission, and spread your word and carry your love to the whole world.

Help them to find new paths, and reinvigorate what they have long known, and grant us the strength to be constant companions to all those in need of your love. For all this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hymn – Guide me, O Thou great Redeemer

Benediction

Go in peace, with our eyes and our hearts focussed on the love of God. And as we go, may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Spirit rest upon you and all whom you love this day and forevermore. Amen.

Closing Song – The Blessing (New Zealand)